



Office of the President

“Free Speech, Inclusivity, and the Public Sphere,” Address to Faculty, April 2017

April 1, 2017

Good afternoon. I will share a few introductory remarks, which I hope will help frame my thinking on the larger questions of free speech that we will discuss today. As I have said many times and in many ways, the most important work we have to do together at Middlebury is create a robust public sphere. In my view, a robust public sphere is one in which members of our community can speak, can be heard, and can fully participate in our public discourse. I would not have asked for a national platform to make this agenda urgent, but urgent it is, and urgent it has become for us as a community of teachers and scholars.

I welcome this discussion and I am proud that we are having it. This is, after all, what we are about as an institution. The very fact that we are having this discussion is a sign of our vitality, and a sign that we are as a faculty fundamentally committed to free speech. We are, after all, exercising free speech about free speech.

I believe it is my responsibility as president of this institution to share with you my own views on the matter to help shape the terms of the debate. So I begin by reminding you what I think about this issue. I have written and stated these thoughts often in the last six months, and even more often in the last four weeks, including at our last faculty meeting. A true commitment to education must embrace an uncompromising commitment to free and open dialogue that expands understanding, challenges our assumptions, and ultimately creates a more inclusive public sphere.

It might be helpful in this context to say more. Controversial speech, or speech by a controversial speaker, can be challenging in a time when the very idea of a public sphere seems fragile. Controversial speech is also more difficult in a time when issues that should be contested, debated, and addressed become exclusively owned by “the left” or “the right.” In our current state, deep educational commitments, such as exploring the history of oppression and freedom, may be difficult to share as common public goods. But they should be understood as such, and it is our responsibility to teach them and to discuss them openly, honestly, and with candor. That is the only way we can reach the truth.

On college campuses, there are many struggles playing themselves out in our public spheres: how does one acknowledge the discomfort that a true liberal education must entail, while at the same time recognizing and respecting the often difficult and unfair experiences of our students who have walked in the American margins? Acknowledging and honoring those margins as real spaces is essential. Honoring the study and articulation of those experiences is crucial to our well-being as a society. And in honoring those margins, we must pay attention to hurt, to offense, to accumulated injury.

How do we relate these two fundamental values—the necessary discomfort that a liberal education must entail, and an honoring of the difficult experiences of our students who have walked in the margins? And how do we do so in the context of free speech debates? As a beginning point, I want to cite University of Chicago Law School professor and First Amendment scholar Geoffrey Stone:

“... experience teaches that the suppression of speech breeds the suppression of speech. If today I am permitted to silence those whose views I find distasteful, I have then opened the door to allow others down the road to silence me. The neutral principle of no suppression of ideas protects us all. This is especially important in the current situation, for in the long run it is likely to be minorities, whether religious minorities, racial minorities, or political minorities, who are most likely to be silenced once censorship is deemed acceptable. Censorship is never a one-way street, and this is a door we do not want to open, perhaps especially in the era of Trump.”

I might put it the following way: if there ever was a time for Americans to take on arguments that offend us, it is now. If there ever was a time for us to challenge influential public views with better

reason, better research, better logic, and better data, it is now. If there ever was a time when we needed to risk being offended, to argue back even while we are feeling afraid, to declare ourselves committed to arguing for a better society, it is now. Engaged, committed speech, speech countering other speech, courageous speech, fearless speech, is today essential to our well-being as a nation.

So I leave you with these three guideposts as we move through this debate:

First, I would like for us to read together. We are small enough as a faculty to do so. I share with you a brief keynote by Geoffrey Stone that I quoted above. He delivered it on April 2nd to the Commission on Higher Education. I think it could be a common text that we all might read and argue about together. I would also recommend the recent study by Pen America, in its “Freedom to Write” series, called “And Campus for All: Diversity, Inclusion, and Freedom of Speech at U.S. Universities.” The major contributor to that study was E.J. Graff, a feminist thinker and award-winning journalist. Finally, I would recommend the AAUP statement on academic freedom.

Second, I caution us not to rush to a judgment on these issues. These questions go to the very heart of who we are as an institution, and we should take our time to learn, to debate, to understand, and to reflect.

Third, we have a responsibility to encourage our students to speak out fearlessly and boldly. If we are hearing from students on all sides of the political spectrum that they are afraid to speak in class, then we as teachers have a responsibility to address this. Even if you think your classroom is an open space in which all students feel free to express their views, and that it is someone else’s classroom where students are afraid to speak, you are likely mistaken. This is a near-universal problem that I hear from the left and the right and the in-between, and we must aspire to be better. We must encourage all of our students to speak their minds, to challenge each other, and to challenge us in the process.

The fate of Middlebury as an institution of excellence and of courageous engagement is at stake. Every single one of us has a responsibility to reflect on the dynamics of our classrooms and to take seriously the challenge of creating a Middlebury where students of all stripes learn to be unafraid to defend their views. The students exhibited this strength on the night of the debate

about free speech right before spring break. I was deeply proud. This is the Middlebury I recognize, and came to lead. Let us encourage them to practice this over and over again.

And in that vein, I might formulate the problem in the following way: most of us have two commitments. We think that education is about exposing students to different ideas and giving them the skills and courage to choose between them. Most of us also think that education is giving students the skills and courage to make this a better world. Most of us agree that both are fundamental to our excellence as an institution. These values are usually not in conflict. However, in our most painful moments, such as the one we experienced in early March, they were indeed conflicting.

In my view, the first of these commitments is a necessary precondition of the second. Education must be free enough to expose students to a wide-range of conflicting and even disturbing ideas, for only then will we be able to give our students the wisdom, the resilience, and the courage to make this a better world.

While I am here with you, I will work as energetically as possible for both inclusivity and freedom of speech. There are no more important projects than these. But this is possible only if academic freedom and freedom of speech are defended on *all* sides. It is only through this principle that we will enable our students to discover truth and achieve the work of making society more just, and it is only in this way that we will in the long run ensure a public sphere that is more inclusive, more vibrant, and more engaging. That is, after all, what we are most fundamentally about.



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